Virago Modern Classics

Attia Hosain

Phoenix Fled

Published by VIRAGO PRESS Limited 1988
20-23 Mandela Street,
London NW1 OHQ.

First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus 1953

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Hosain, Attia
Phoenix fled.
I. Title
823[F]

ISBN 0-86068-641-8

Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman of Reading, Berks

Published by VIRAGO PRESS Limited 1988
20-23 Mandela Street,
London NW1 OHQ.

First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus 1953

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Hosain, Attia
Phoenix fled.
I. Title
823[F]

ISBN 0-86068-641-8

Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman of Reading, Berks

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In India, the past never disappears. It does not even become transformed into a ghost. Concrete, physical, palpable — it is present everywhere. Ruins, monuments, litter the streets, hold up the traffic, create strange islands in the modernity of the cities. No one fears or avoids them — goats and cows graze around them, the poor string up ropes and rags and turn them into dwellings, election campaigners and cinema distributors plaster them with pamphlets — and so they remain a part of the here and now, of today.

In other ways, too, the past clings. As sticky as glue, or syrup. Traditions. Customs. "Why do you paint a tika on your baby's forehead?" "Why do you fall at your father's feet and touch your forehead to the ground?" "Why does a woman fast on this particular day?" "Why bathe in the river during an eclipse?" "Why does the bridegroom arrive on a horse, bearing a sword?" It is the custom, the tradition. No further explanation is required than this — it has always been so, it must continue to be so.

If there is a break in that tradition, then — "What will happen?" Things too terrible to be named. The downfall of the family, of society, of religion, of the motherland, India herself.

So a woman will paint a tika on her baby's forehead, a young man touch an elder's feet, a marriage need to be approved not only by parents but an astrologer as well ... and so life is lived according to its rules, rules prescribed by time, centuries of time.

Of course time moves in other directions as well — TV and radio sets invade homes, the sari is given up for jeans, the old astrologer laughed at and the priest avoided, the past scorned. But it remains. Like the colour of one's skin, and eyes, it remains. It does not leave.

Attia Hosain's novel and collection of short stories are monuments to that past: the history of north India, before Partition. A monument suggests a gravestone — grey, cold and immutable. Her books are not: they are delicate and tender, like new grass, and they stir with life and the play of sunlight and rain. To read them is as if one had parted a curtain, or opened a door, and strayed into the past.

That is their charm and significance. To read them is like wrapping oneself up in one's mother's wedding sari, lifting the family jewels out of a faded box and admiring their glitter, inhaling the musky perfume of old silks in a camphor chest. Almost forgotten colours and scents; one wonders if one can endure them in the light of what has come to pass. But guiltily, with a laugh, the reader can't but confess "Really? Is that how it was? It must have been —" Glamorous? Fascinating? Outrageous? Impossible?

What are the precise ingredients of that now diffi-

cult to visualise past? For Attia Hosain it was an undivided India in which Muslims and Hindus celebrated the same festivals and often worshipped at the same shrines.

> Not only did he observe the rituals of his own religion, but in the month of Moharrum, he kept a "tazia" in a specially prepared shed. On the tenth day of the month, the elaborate man-high tomb made of bright-coloured paper and tinsel was carried to its burial in a procession. The Muslim servants recited dirges in memory of the martyred family of the Prophet, while he and his sons followed in barefooted, bareheaded respect. (Shiv Prasad, "White Leopard", *Phoenix Fled.*)

Society was not then in flux, it was static, and it was a feudal society. To know what feudalism meant, one has to read *Sunlight on a Broken Column* or *Phoenix Fled* and learn how it was made — how the land belonged to the wealthy *taluqdars*, how the peasants worked upon it, what was exacted from them and what was, in return, done to or for them. How women lived in a secluded part of the house, jealously protected by their menfolk, and what powers were theirs, or not. How deference had always to be shown to the ancestors, to the aristocracy, to the priests, who could choose either to exploit or harrass their dependents or, if they had any nobility of spirit, protect and nurture them. How the one unforgiveable sin was to rock this hierarchy, its stability. How no one could offend religion or the family or society by going against it and only those who lived according to its

rules could survive.

Born in 1913, Attia Hosain came from a background and a family that equipped her with all the knowledge she needed to write these books. Her father was a *taluqdar* of Oudh, a state in north India that the British knew as the United Provinces, the home of nawabs who dazzled even the wealthy colonists by the splendour of their courts. She belongs to the clan of Kidwais that has produced many distinguished and prominent men of this century. Her father studied at Christ College, Cambridge, and the Middle Temple, and like other young men in his circle of contemporaries, became well known in the political and national movements of his time. A great friend of his was Motilal Nehru, the father of Jawaharlal Nehru. Attia Hosain's mother came from a family that had distinguished itself in another world — the intellectual one — and had been educated in the old Persian and Urdu tradition. When her father died, Attia Hosain was only eleven years old. They were a family of five children, the youngest born two months after the father's death, yet the mother took over all responsibility for them, and for the estate — an unusual step for a woman at that time — and brought up her children very strictly, according to tradition. Attia Hosain says "I learnt from her how strong women can be when faced with tragedy and pressure." Although she had English governesses and studied at the La Martiniere School for Girls, she had lessons in Urdu and Arabic when she returned home,

and read the Quran, kept close to the roots of her own culture by her mother and, before her, by her father who made sure they never lost touch with their ancestral village. During his lifetime their house had been filled with the political leaders and great figures of the society of the time and "We seemed to live with the cultures of the East and the West in a way that was not dissimilar from that of many Indian families," but the daughters of the house had a traditional upbringing nevertheless, and lived sheltered, rather secluded lives. Their religious education was liberal and they did not wear *burqas* but the car had silk curtains at the windows!

Attia Hosain read "any books I could lay my hands on" and as her father owned an extensive library, she grew up — "unsupervised" — on the English classics. She went to the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, then the foremost college for women in India, and won scholarships. She persuaded her mother she should not be kept at home with her sisters and was the first woman from a *taluqdar's* family to graduate — in 1933 — from the University of Lucknow. In spite of this not inconsiderable triumph, she resented the distinction made between sons and daughters in the family and the fact that she was not sent to Cambridge as her brother had been. Her rebellion took the form of a marriage to her cousin, against her mother's wishes. He had been educated at Clifton and at Cambridge. Her father-in-law was also a *taluqdar* and, like her father, played a prominent

role in the political, civic and social life of the UP; he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lucknow.

The family tradition of weaving together the political and the intellectual strands influenced Attia Hosain's life and thought. She claims

> I was greatly influenced in the 30s by the young friends and relations who came back from English schools and universities as left wing activists, Communists and Congress socialists. I was at the first Progressive Writers' Conference and could be called a "fellow traveller" at the time. I did not actively enter politics as I was (and may always have been?) tied and restricted in many ways by traditional bonds of duty to the family.

Her mother-in-law was right wing and represented the Muslim League in the UP Assembly but maintained her independent view that Muslim leaders should remain in India, not go to Pakistan, and look after the interests of Muslims in India. Attia Hosain confesses that her own ideal of womanhood was embodied in Sarojini Naidu, the poet/politician who made her "overcome my shyness and go to the All India Womens' Conference in Calcutta in 1933".

As a well-educated, thoughtful young woman at the heart of the storm in an India on the brink of Independence and Partition, she wrote for *The Pioneer*, then edited by Desmond Young, and for *The Statesman*, the leading English language newspaper in Calcutta. She also wrote short stories — "some published, some unpublished" — but "never believed in

myself as a writer!" In spite of her ideals and those of many other Muslims in India, Partition proved inevitable at Independence and, rather than go to Pakistan, the Muslim ideal in which she did not believe, she chose to take her children to England, a country she had come to know when her husband was posted to the Indian High Commission, and earned her living by broadcasting and presenting her own women's programme on the Eastern Service of the BBC.

> Events during and after Partition are to this day very painful to me. And now, in my old age, the strength of my roots is strong; it also causes pain, because it makes one a "stranger" everywhere in the deeper area of one's mind and spirit *except where one was born and brought up.*

To read her novel and short stories is to become aware of the many and varied threads that go to make up a rich and interesting life as well as the many doubts and struggles and contradictions it contained. They reflect her pride in ancestry and heredity as well as sorrow at the frequency with which they are tarnished by some heedless, unjust or selfish action. They present her ardent love for all that was gracious and splendid in the aristocracy she knew as well as her awareness of the dark obverse side experienced by hapless dependents. They show her keen sense of the two ruling concepts of Indian behaviour — *Izzat*/honour, and *Sharam*/dishonour — passionately adhering to the former and reworking in her mind the many forms taken by the latter, not always the tradi-

tional ones. They show her appreciation of the warmth, supportiveness, laughter and emotional richness to be found in the joint family as well as an acknowledgment of how often the joint family could become a prison and a punishment. She displays an enormous pride and belief in womanhood but creates many, widely differing representatives of it, some worthy of respect, others of pity, still others of shame. The pleasures she takes in privilege and all its accoutrement are never divorced from a sense of the responsibility of possessing them, an almost queenly sense of *noblesse oblige.*

The many-coloured threads that go to weave the matter of the two books on which Attia Hosain's reputation is based also give a distinctive quality to her prose. It is as rich and ornate as a piece of brocade, or embroidery, resembling the sari she describes in the short story "Time Is Unredeemable": "deep-red Benares net with large gold flowers scattered all over it and formalised in two rows along the edge as a border". Not for her the stripped and bare simplicity of modern prose — that would not be in keeping with the period — which might make it difficult for the modern reader not as at home as she with the older literary style, but it is in harmony with the material. It is also important to remember that Attia Hosain is actually reproducing, whether consciously or not, the Persian literary style and mannerisms she was taught when young, and reading her prose brings one as close as it is possible, in the

English language, to the Urdu origins and the Persian inspiration. Urdu is a language that lends itself to the flamboyant and the poetic and so it is a suitable medium through which to describe the Muslim society of Lucknow and the Persian influence in north India, although married to the local Hindi of the Hindu population and modified by a Western education in the English language.

And the literary and the stylised are balanced by a certain delicacy and freshness as well as lightened by flashes of wit and humour. Her greatest strength lies in her ability to draw a rich, full portrait of her society — ignoring none of its many faults and cruelties, and capable of including not only men and women of immense power and privilege but, to an *equal* extent, the poor who laboured as their servants. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of her writing is the tenderness she shows for those who served her family, an empathy for a class not her own.

When this collection was first published, in 1953, John Connell described the short stories as "little vignettes, precise, loving and exquisitely true, in spirit and in fact," and the *Times Literary Supplement* noted their "unusual distinction and charm".

Exquisite, delicate, charming — unavoidable words when one attempts to describe the quality of Attia Hosain's prose. It is the literary equivalent of the miniature school of painting in India, introduced by the Moghuls. Her stories can well be likened to those busy little vignettes in gem-like colours (so often

actually including gems), of princes and princesses sporting on moonlit terraces, rose gardens with fountains and peacocks, bazaars with horse and elephant carriages, peopled by lively, active figures all deeply involved in a way of life, a period of time, a particular place and age.

But there is more to them than their colour and charm, their beauty and grace. What makes them truly interesting is the reconstruction of a feudal society and its depiction from the point of view of the idealised, benevolent aristocrat who feels a sense of duty and responsibility towards his dependents — women as well as servants. This character is something of a stock-in-trade with writers about the Indian scene of that period, but in Attia Hosain's work he — or she — fades into the anonymous figure of the narrator, and the interest is focused upon the lively world of the servants and their families who live in low-roofed, thatched mud huts in long rows in the compound from where they can be summoned to work at all hours. This is where the most intense dramas take place, where the comedies and tragedies are at their most heightened. Such aspects of poverty as theft, prostitution, illness and exploitation are not ignored but acknowledged as inherent in the social structure and they are depicted with a vigorous realism as well as warm compassion.

In this world of the servants' quarters and the compound, the main issues are exactly the same as in the big house with its wealth and comforts. Chiefly, they

are the twin issues of *Izzat/Sharam*, honour/dishonour — in that world, at that time, a matter of life and death, quite literally.

In "The Loss", an aged maidservant, once wet nurse to the narrator, is robbed of all her savings, packed into a box under her bed. She is broken by the loss. " 'What am I, robbed of my possessions?' " she weeps. " 'I am destitute, a beggar, I am at the mercy of the lowest. What am I now that I should live?' " "What she had been yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that through the accepted years", replies the shocked narrator but, on reflecting upon her much mightier hoard of belongings, realises " 'What am I without mine?' " Determined to restore to the old woman what gives meaning to a lifetime of labour, she calls in her friend the police superintendent, to deal with the case, then is dismayed to learn that he suspects the old woman's son Chand who is known to have run up gambling debts. The narrator challenges Chand before all the servants who are trying to discover the thief by an age-old, time-tested method of making everyone chew a handful of rice to see in whose mouth the rice turns to dry powder (the fabricators of superstition could be psychologists) but the old woman will not let her son be put to the test. " 'What need have you to steal? God has given you enough. And if my son were to steal from me I would that he were dead, and I with him.' " Seeing that the loss of the family honour, *Izzat*, would be harder to bear than the loss of her belongings, the narrator

presses the matter no further. In their common regard for *Izzat*, their common fear of *Sharam*, she finds a link with the old woman as strong as when she was an infant, the old woman her wet nurse.

In "White Leopard", a one-time dacoit, a brigand, is zealous in protecting his *Izzat*, even if it is the honour of thieves. He has given up a life of dacoity to be a servant in a rich house, but boasts " 'Everyone can't be like I was. Even these sons of mine . . . would not make good dacoits. They are weak, credulous and with no judgment. They cannot support a job; a job must support them.' " But when one of those despicable sons is accused of theft by his employer, Mr Bell (once a shoemaker, Bela Ram, now a convert, a Methodist, a shopkeeper, and despised both for his origins and his duplicity), the father's reaction is explosive and fierce — his Brahmin *Izzat* has been insulted by a low-caste shoemaker. " 'My son sells his service, not his honour.' "

The other theme of these stories, and of their characters, high or low-born, is that of Kismet, fate, the overruling belief that what is written into the palm of the hand, spelt out by the stars in the sky, cannot be altered or escaped and that it is the test of a human being how he or she carries that burden, honourably or with shame.

In "The Daughter-in-Law" an old maidservant goes to the village to fetch the little girl who is married to her son but not old enough to go to him as a bride; articles begin to disappear from the house; the child

is suspected and found guilty of theft as well as other little crimes; her vacant look and stubborn silence broken by outbursts of senseless talk make the servants think of her as "possessed". The distraught mother-in-law wails " 'You talk as if you were certain she was a lunatic or possessed by the devil. Whatever she be, she is my kismet's burden; she must stay with me.' " Later, beleagured by the others' demand that she be sent back to the village she accepts " 'Do with her what you will; she is my kismet's curse.' "

Still harsher is the story of the little girl in "The Street of the Moon" who is married off to an old, opium-addicted cook in the household. The women servants paint her hands with henna and rub her with jasmine-oil, preparing her for the wedding; Hasina is enchanted by all the fuss and laughs with delight, making her mother scold " 'Stop laughing, you shameless hussy. You will laugh even on your wedding day,' " and " 'Oh, what did I do to bear such a child?' " No sooner is the wedding over that the women scold " 'What does a man marry for? Just so the woman can sit and adorn herself? You are a poor man's daughter and a poor man's wife,' " and they make her change into her old rags and sweep the floor. Too high-spirited to be beaten into that, Hasina flirts with the younger men on the compound, even the old cook's son; when she is found out, she runs away. The old cook goes back to his old ways of taking opium and haunting the street of prostitutes in the bazaar and there finds her again.

Hasina's eyes looked into his, large black-painted, steel-bright, diamond-hard, from a powdered face pallid in the harsh light, with red-circled cheeks, and a straight-lipped, painted mouth set in a smile around tobacco-blackened teeth.

Those who inhabit the big house seem pale and ghostly by comparison with such characters, their lives have a thinness, a shrunkenness about them. In "The Gossamer Thread" the husband, a so-called "intellectual" fails his friend, a revolutionary, who asks for a night's shelter, because he is too cowardly to give it. Instead, his wife, an uneducated and simple woman who irritates him by her childishness, offers it readily. In "The First Party", a young bride is taken to a smart party in the Western manner, feels shocked by the behaviour and dress of the other guests and refuses to please her husband by dancing with them. More poignant is the once-pretty bride of "Time Is Unredeemable" who has grown old in her in-laws' home while waiting for her husband to return from his studies in England, delayed there by the war. When she learns he is to return, she takes the brave step of going into the city to buy "modern" clothes — a hideous coat she thinks will please him. He is not pleased, he is distressed — " 'I don't want you to wear that old coat, it reminds me of my landlady' " — and leaves her, unable to establish a relationship where none ever existed. Her life is wrecked. Kismet.

In this story, as in many others, "Westernisation" is seen as destructive of the old, traditional culture. The

latter may be full of cruelties and injustices, but it is a pattern of life known and understood, therefore more acceptable and more fitting than an alien culture that has been neither fully understood nor assimilated. Attia Hosain's work is by no means an unreserved paean of praise for the old culture but is certainly full of an inherited, instinctive love for it.

Anita Desai, Massachusetts, 1988

THE FIRST PARTY

AFTER the dimness of the verandah, the bewildering brightness of the room made her stumble against the unseen doorstep. Her nervousness edged towards panic, and the darkness seemed a forsaken friend, but her husband was already steadying her into the room.

"My wife," he said in English, and the alien sounds softened the awareness of this new relationship.

The smiling, tall woman came towards them with outstretched hands and she put her own limply into the other's firm grasp.

"How d'you do?" said the woman.

"How d'you do?" said the fat man beside her.

"I am very well, thank you," she said in the low voice of an uncertain child repeating a lesson. Her shy glance avoided their eyes.

They turned to her husband, and in the warm current of their friendly ease she stood coldly self-conscious.

"I hope we are not too early," her husband said.

"Of course not; the others are late. Do sit down."

She sat on the edge of the big chair, her shoulders drooping, nervously pulling her sari over her head as the weight of its heavy gold embroidery pulled it back.

"What will you drink?" the fat man asked her.

"Nothing, thank you."

"Cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

Her husband and the tall woman were talking about her, she felt sure. Pinpoints of discomfort pricked her and she smiled to hide them.

The woman held a wineglass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wondered how it felt to hold a cigarette with such self-confidence; to flick the ash with such assurance. The woman had long nails, pointed and scarlet. She looked at her own — unpainted, cut carefully short — wondering how anyone could eat, work, wash with those claws dipped in blood. She drew her sari over her hands, covering her rings and bracelets, noticing the other's bare wrists, like a widow's.

"Shy little thing, isn't she, but charming," said the woman as if soothing a frightened child.

"She'll get over it soon. Give me time," her husband laughed. She heard him and blushed, wishing to be left unobserved and grateful for the diversion when other guests came in.

She did not know whether she was meant to stand up when they were being introduced, and

shifted uneasily in the chair, half rising; but her husband came and stood by her, and by the pressure of his hand on her shoulder she knew she must remain sitting.

She was glad when polite formality ended and they forgot her for their drinks, their cigarettes, their talk and laughter. She shrank into her chair, lonely in her strangeness yet dreading approach. She felt curious eyes on her and her discomfort multiplied them. When anyone came and sat by her she smiled in cold defence, uncertainty seeking refuge in silence, and her brief answers crippled conversation. She found the bi-lingual patchwork distracting, and its pattern, familiar to others, with allusions and references unrelated to her own experiences, was distressingly obscure. Overheard light chatter appealing to her woman's mind brought no relief of understanding. Their different stresses made even talk of dress and appearance sound unfamiliar. She could not understand the importance of relating clothes to time and place and not just occasion; nor their preoccupation with limbs and bodies, which should be covered, and not face and features alone. They made problems about things she took for granted.

Her bright rich clothes and heavy jewellery oppressed her when she saw the simplicity of their clothes. She wished she had not dressed so, even if it was the custom, because no one seemed to care

for customs, or even know them, and looked at her as if she were an object on display. Her discomfort changed to uneasy defiance, and she stared at the strange creatures around her. But her swift eyes slipped away in timid shyness if they met another's.

Her husband came at intervals that grew longer with a few gay words, or a friend to whom he proudly presented "My wife." She noticed the never-empty glass in his hand, and the smell of his breath, and from shock and distress she turned to disgust and anger. It was wicked, it was sinful to drink, and she could not forgive him.

She could not make herself smile any more but no one noticed and their unconcern soured her anger. She did not want to be disturbed and was tired of the persistent "Will you have a drink?", "What will you drink?", "Sure you won't drink?" It seemed they objected to her not drinking, and she was confused by this reversal of values. She asked for a glass of orange juice and used it as protection, putting it to her lips when anyone came near.

They were eating now, helping themselves from the table by the wall. She did not want to leave her chair, and wondered if it was wrong and they would notice she was not eating. In her confusion she saw a girl coming towards her, carrying a small tray. She sat up stiffly and took the proffered plate with a smile.

"Do help yourself," the girl said and bent forward. Her light sari slipped from her shoulder and the tight red silk blouse outlined each high breast. She pulled her own sari closer round her, blushing. The girl, unaware, said, "Try this sandwich, and the olives are good."

She had never seen an olive before but did not want to admit it, and when she put it in her mouth she wanted to spit it out. When no one was looking, she slipped it under her chair, then felt sure someone had seen her and would find it.

The room closed in on her with its noise and smoke. There was now the added harsh clamour of music from the radiogram. She watched, fascinated, the movement of the machine as it changed records; but she hated the shrieking and moaning and discordant noises it hurled at her. A girl walked up to it and started singing, swaying her hips. The bare flesh of her body showed through the thin net of her drapery below the high line of her short tight bodice.

She felt angry again. The disgusting, shameless hussies, bold and free with men, their clothes adorning nakedness not hiding it, with their painted false mouths, that short hair that looked like the mad woman's whose hair was cropped to stop her pulling it out.

She fed her resentment with every possible fault her mind could seize on, and she tried to deny her lonely unhappiness with contempt and

moral passion. These women who were her own kind, yet not so, were wicked, contemptible, grotesque mimics of the foreign ones among them for whom she felt no hatred because from them she expected nothing better.

She wanted to break those records, the noise from which they called music.

A few couples began to dance when they had rolled aside the carpet. She felt a sick horror at the way the men held the women, at the closeness of their bodies, their vulgar suggestive movements. That surely was the extreme limit of what was possible in the presence of others. Her mother had nearly died in childbirth and not moaned lest the men outside hear her voice, and she, her child, had to see this exhibition of . . . her outraged modesty put a leash on her thoughts.

This was an assault on the basic precept by which her convictions were shaped, her life was controlled. Not against touch alone, but sound and sight, had barriers been raised against man's desire.

A man came and asked her to dance and she shrank back in horror, shaking her head. Her husband saw her and called out as he danced, "Come on, don't be shy; you'll soon learn."

She felt a flame of anger as she looked at him, and kept on shaking her head until the man left her, surprised by the violence of her refusal. She saw him dancing with another girl and knew they

must be talking about her, because they looked towards her and smiled.

She was trembling with the violent complexity of her feelings, of anger, hatred, jealousy and bewilderment, when her husband walked up to her and pulled her affectionately by the hand.

"Get up. I'll teach you myself."

She gripped her chair as she struggled, and the violence of her voice through clenched teeth, "Leave me alone," made him drop her hand with shocked surprise as the laughter left his face. She noticed his quick embarrassed glance round the room, then the hard anger of his eyes as he left her without a word. He laughed more gaily when he joined the others, to drown that moment's silence, but it enclosed her in dreary emptiness.

She had been so sure of herself in her contempt and her anger, confident of the righteousness of her beliefs, deep-based on generation-old foundations. When she had seen them being attacked, in her mind they remained indestructible, and her anger had been a sign of faith; but now she saw her husband was one of the destroyers; and yet she knew that above all others was the belief that her life must be one with his. In confusion and despair she was surrounded by ruins.

She longed for the sanctuary of the walled home from which marriage had promised an adventurous escape. Each restricting rule became a

guiding stone marking a safe path through unknown dangers.

The tall woman came and sat beside her and with affection put her hand on her head.

"Tired, child?" The compassion of her voice and eyes was unbearable.

She got up and ran to the verandah, put her head against a pillar and wet it with her tears.